

# 10

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## SPINOZA

Spinoza (1632–77) is the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers. Intellectually, some others have surpassed him, but ethically he is supreme. As a natural consequence, he was considered, during his lifetime and for a century after his death, a man of appalling wickedness. He was born a Jew, but the Jews excommunicated him. Christians abhorred him equally; although his whole philosophy is dominated by the idea of God, the orthodox accused him of atheism. Leibniz, who owed much to him, concealed his debt, and carefully abstained from saying a word in his praise; he even went so far as to lie about the extent of his personal acquaintance with the heretic Jew.

The life of Spinoza was very simple. His family had come to Holland from Spain, or perhaps Portugal, to escape the Inquisition. He himself was educated in Jewish learning, but found it impossible to remain orthodox. He was offered 1000 florins a year to conceal his doubts; when he refused, an attempt was made to assassinate him; when this failed, he was cursed with all the curses in Deuteronomy and with the curse that Elisha pronounced on the children who, in consequence, were torn to pieces by the she-bears. But no she-bears attacked Spinoza. He lived quietly, first at Amsterdam and then at the Hague, making his living by polishing lenses. His wants were few and simple, and he showed throughout his life a rare indifference to money. The few who knew him loved him, even if they disapproved of his principles. The Dutch Government, with its usual liberalism, tolerated his opinions on theological matters, though at one time he was in bad odour politically because he sided with the De Witts against the House of Orange. At the early age of forty-three he died of phthisis.

His chief work, the *Ethics*, was published posthumously. Before considering it, a few words must be said about two of his other books, the *Tractatus*

*Theologico-Politicus* and the *Tractatus Politicus*. The former is a curious combination of biblical criticism and political theory; the latter deals with political theory only. In biblical criticism Spinoza partially anticipates modern views, particularly in assigning much later dates to various books of the Old Testament than those assigned by tradition. He endeavours throughout to show that the Scriptures can be interpreted so as to be compatible with a liberal theology.

Spinoza's political theory is, in the main, derived from Hobbes, in spite of the enormous temperamental difference between the two men. He holds that in a state of nature there is no right or wrong, for wrong consists in disobeying the law. He holds that the sovereign can do no wrong, and agrees with Hobbes that the Church should be entirely subordinate to the State. He is opposed to all rebellion, even against a bad government, and instances the troubles in England as a proof of the harm that comes of forcible resistance to authority. But he disagrees with Hobbes in thinking democracy the 'most natural' form of government. He disagrees also in holding that subjects should not sacrifice all their rights to the sovereign. In particular, he holds freedom of opinion important. I do not quite know how he reconciles this with the opinion that religious questions should be decided by the State. I think when he says this he means that they should be decided by the State rather than the Church; in Holland the State was much more tolerant than the Church.

Spinoza's *Ethics* deals with three distinct matters. It begins with metaphysics; it then goes on to the psychology of the passions and the will; and finally it sets forth an ethic based on the preceding metaphysics and psychology. The metaphysic is a modification of Descartes, the psychology is reminiscent of Hobbes, but the ethic is original, and is what is of most value in the book. The relation of Spinoza to Descartes is in some ways not unlike the relation of Plotinus to Plato. Descartes was a many-sided man, full of intellectual curiosity, but not much burdened with moral earnestness. Although he invented 'proofs' intended to support orthodox beliefs, he could have been used by sceptics as Carneades used Plato. Spinoza, although he was not without scientific interests, and even wrote a treatise on the rainbow, was in the main concerned with religion and virtue. He accepted from Descartes and his contemporaries a materialistic and deterministic physics, and sought, within this framework, to find room for reverence and a life devoted to the Good. His attempt was magnificent, and rouses admiration even in those who do not think it successful.

The metaphysical system of Spinoza is of the type inaugurated by Parmenides. There is only one substance, 'God or Nature'; nothing finite is self-subsistent. Descartes admitted three substances, God and mind and matter; it is true that, even for him, God was, in a sense, more substantial than mind and matter, since He had created them, and could, if He chose,

annihilate them. But except in relation to God's omnipotence, mind and matter were two independent substances, defined, respectively, by the attributes of thought and extension. Spinoza would have none of this. For him, thought and extension were both attributes of God. God has also an infinite number of other attributes, since He must be in every respect infinite; but these others are unknown to us. Individual souls and separate pieces of matter are, for Spinoza, adjectival; they are not *things*, but merely aspects of the divine Being. There can be no such personal immortality as Christians believe in, but only that impersonal sort that consists in becoming more and more one with God. Finite things are defined by their boundaries, physical or logical, that is to say, by what they are *not*: 'all determination is negation'. There can be only one Being who is wholly positive, and He must be absolutely infinite. Hence Spinoza is led to a complete and undiluted pantheism.

Everything, according to Spinoza, is ruled by an absolute logical necessity. There is no such thing as free will in the mental sphere or chance in the physical world. Everything that happens is a manifestation of God's inscrutable nature, and it is logically impossible that events should be other than they are. This leads to difficulties in regard to sin, which critics were not slow to point out. One of them, observing that, according to Spinoza, everything is decreed by God and is therefore good, asks indignantly: Was it good that Nero should kill his mother? Was it good that Adam ate the apple? Spinoza answers that what was positive in these acts was good, and only what was negative was bad; but negation exists only from the point of view of finite creatures. In God, who alone is completely real, there is no negation, and therefore the evil in what to us seem sins does not exist when they are viewed as parts of the whole. This doctrine, though, in one form or another, it has been held by most mystics, cannot, obviously, be reconciled with the orthodox doctrine of sin and damnation. It is bound up with Spinoza's complete rejection of free will. Although not at all polemical, Spinoza was too honest to conceal his opinions, however shocking to contemporaries; the abhorrence of his teaching is therefore not surprising.

The *Ethics* is set forth in the style of Euclid, with definitions, axioms, and theorems; everything after the axioms is supposed to be rigorously demonstrated by deductive argument. This makes him difficult reading. A modern student, who cannot suppose that there are rigorous 'proofs' of such things as he professes to establish, is bound to grow impatient with the detail of the demonstrations, which is, in fact, not worth mastering. It is enough to read the enunciations of the propositions, and to study the scholia, which contain much of what is best in the *Ethics*. But it would show a lack of understanding to blame Spinoza for his geometrical method. It was of the essence of his system, ethically as well as metaphysically, to maintain that everything *could* be demonstrated, and it was therefore essential to produce demonstrations.

We cannot accept his method, but that is because we cannot accept his metaphysic. We cannot believe that the interconnections of the parts of the universe are *logical*, because we hold that scientific laws are to be discovered by observation, not by reasoning alone. But for Spinoza the geometrical method was necessary, and was bound up with the most essential parts of his doctrine.

I come now to Spinoza's theory of the emotions. This comes after a metaphysical discussion of the nature and origin of the mind, which leads up to the astonishing proposition that 'the human mind has an adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God'. But the passions, which are discussed in the Third Book of the *Ethics*, distract us and obscure our intellectual vision of the whole. 'Everything,' we are told, 'in so far as it is in itself, endeavours to persevere in its own being.' Hence arise love and hate and strife. The psychology of Book III is entirely egoistic. 'He who conceives that the object of his hate is destroyed will feel pleasure.' 'If we conceive that anyone takes delight in something, which only one person can possess, we shall endeavour to bring it about, that the man in question shall not gain possession thereof.' But even in this Book there are moments when Spinoza abandons the appearance of mathematically demonstrated cynicism, as when he says: 'Hatred is increased by being reciprocated, and can on the other hand be destroyed by love.' Self-preservation is the fundamental motive of the passions, according to Spinoza; but self-preservation alters its character when we realize that what is real and positive in us is what unites us to the whole, and not what preserves the appearance of separateness.

The last two books of the *Ethics*, entitled respectively 'Of human bondage, or the strength of the emotions' and 'Of the power of the understanding, or of human freedom,' are the most interesting. We are in bondage in proportion as what happens to us is determined by outside causes, and we are free in proportion as we are self-determined. Spinoza, like Socrates and Plato, believes that all wrong action is due to intellectual error: the man who adequately understands his own circumstances will act wisely, and will even be happy in the face of what to another would be misfortune. He makes no appeal to unselfishness; he holds that self-seeking, in some sense, and more particularly self-preservation, govern all human behaviour. 'No virtue can be conceived as prior to this endeavour to preserve one's own being.' But his conception of what a wise man will choose as the goal of his self-seeking is different from that of the ordinary egoist: 'The mind's highest good is the knowledge of God, and the mind's highest virtue is to know God.' Emotions are called 'passions' when they spring from inadequate ideas; passions in different men may conflict, but men who live in obedience to reason will agree together. Pleasure in itself is good, but hope and fear are bad, and so are humility and repentance: 'he who repents of an action is doubly wretched or

infirm'. Spinoza regards time as unreal, and therefore all emotions which have to do essentially with an event as future or as past are contrary to reason. 'In so far as the mind conceives a thing under the dictate of reason, it is affected equally, whether the idea be of a thing present, past, or future.'

This is hard saying, but it is of the essence of Spinoza's system, and we shall do well to dwell upon it for a moment. In popular estimation, 'all's well that ends well'; if the universe is gradually improving, we think better of it than if it is gradually deteriorating, even if the sum of good and evil be the same in the two cases. We are more concerned about a disaster in our own time than in the time of Jenghiz Khan. According to Spinoza this is irrational. Whatever happens is part of the eternal timeless world as God sees it; to Him, the date is irrelevant. The wise man, so far as human finitude allows, endeavours to see the world as God sees it, *sub specie æternitatis*, under the aspect of eternity. But, you may retort, we are surely right in being more concerned about future misfortunes, which may possibly be averted, than about past calamities about which we can do nothing. To this argument Spinoza's determinism supplies the answer. Only ignorance makes us think that we can alter the future; what will be will be, and the future is as unalterably fixed as the past. That is why hope and fear are condemned: both depend upon viewing the future as uncertain, and therefore spring from lack of wisdom.

When we acquire, in so far as we can, a vision of the world which is analogous to God's, we see everything as part of the whole, and as necessary to the goodness of the whole. Therefore 'the knowledge of evil is an inadequate knowledge'. God has no knowledge of evil, because there is no evil to be known; the appearance of evil only arises through regarding parts of the universe as if they were self-subsistent.

Spinoza's outlook is intended to liberate men from the tyranny of fear. 'A free man thinks of nothing less than of death; and his wisdom is a meditation not of death, but of life.' Spinoza lived up to this precept very completely. On the last day of his life he was entirely calm, not exalted, like Socrates in the *Phædo*, but conversing, as he would on any other day, about matters of interest to his interlocutor. Unlike some other philosophers, he not only believed his own doctrines, but practised them; I do not know of any occasion, in spite of great provocation, in which he was betrayed into the kind of heat or anger that his ethic condemned. In controversy he was courteous and reasonable, never denouncing, but doing his utmost to persuade.

In so far as what happens to us springs from ourselves, it is good; only what comes from without is bad for us. 'As all things whereof a man is the efficient cause are necessarily good, no evil can befall a man except through external causes.' Obviously, therefore, nothing bad can happen to the universe as a whole, since it is not subject to external causes. 'We are a part of universal nature, and we follow her order. If we have a clear and distinct understanding

of this, that part of our nature which is defined by intelligence, in other words the better part of ourselves, will assuredly acquiesce in what befalls us, and in such acquiescence will endeavour to persist.' In so far as a man is an unwilling part of a larger whole, he is in bondage; but in so far as, through the understanding, he has grasped the sole reality of the whole, he is free. The implications of this doctrine are developed in the last Book of the *Ethics*.

Spinoza does not, like the Stoics, object to all emotions; he objects only to those that are 'passions', i.e. those in which we appear to ourselves to be passive in the power of outside forces. 'An emotion which is a passion ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it.' Understanding that all things are necessary helps the mind to acquire power over the emotions. 'He who clearly and distinctly understands himself and his emotions, loves God, and so much the more as he more understands himself and his emotions.' This proposition introduces us to the 'intellectual love of God', in which wisdom consists. The intellectual love of God is a union of thought and emotion: it consists, I think one may say, in true thought combined with joy in the apprehension of truth. All joy in true thought is part of the intellectual love of God, for it contains nothing negative, and is therefore truly part of the whole, not only apparently, as are fragmentary things so separated in thought as to appear bad.

I said a moment ago that the intellectual love of God involves joy, but perhaps this was a mistake, for Spinoza says that God is not affected by any emotion of pleasure or pain, and also says that 'the intellectual love of the mind towards God is part of the infinite love wherewith God loves himself'. I think, nevertheless, that there is something in 'intellectual love' which is not mere intellect; perhaps the joy involved is considered as something superior to pleasure.

'Love towards God,' we are told, 'must hold the chief place in the mind.' I have omitted Spinoza's demonstrations, but in so doing I have given an incomplete picture of his thought. As the proof of the above proposition is short, I will quote it in full; the reader can then in imagination supply proofs to other propositions. The proof of the above proposition is as follows:

'For this love is associated with all the modifications of the body (V, 14) and is fostered by them all (V, 15); therefore (V, 11) it must hold the chief place in the mind, Q.E.D.'

Of the propositions referred to in the above proof, V, 14 states: 'The mind can bring it about, that all bodily modifications or images of things may be referred to the idea of God'; V, 15, quoted above, states: 'He who clearly and distinctly understands himself and his emotions loves God, and so much the more in proportion as he understands himself and his emotions'; V, 11 states: 'In proportion as a mental image is referred to more objects, so is it more frequent, or more often vivid, and occupies the mind more.'

The 'proof' quoted above might be expressed as follows: Every increase in the understanding of what happens to us consists in referring events to the idea of God, since, in truth, everything is part of God. This understanding of everything as part of God is love of God. When all objects are referred to God, the idea of God will fully occupy the mind.

Thus the statement that 'love of God must hold the chief place in the mind' is not a primarily moral exhortation, but an account of what must inevitably happen as we acquire understanding.

We are told that no one can hate God, but, on the other hand, 'he who loves God cannot endeavour that God should love him in return'. Goethe, who admired Spinoza without even beginning to understand him, thought this proposition an instance of self-abnegation. It is nothing of the sort, but a logical consequence of Spinoza's metaphysic. He does not say that a man *ought* not to want God to love him; he says that a man who loves God *cannot* want God to love him. This is made plain by the proof, which says: 'For, if a man should so endeavour, he would desire (V, 17, Corol.) that God, whom he loves, should not be God, and consequently he would desire to feel pain (III, 19), which is absurd (III, 28).' V, 17 is the proposition already referred to, which says that God has no passions or pleasures or pains; the corollary referred to above deduces that God loves and hates no one. Here again what is involved is not an ethical precept, but a logical necessity: a man who loved God and wished God to love him would be wishing to feel pain, 'which is absurd'.

The statement that God can love no one should not be considered to contradict the statement that God loves Himself with an infinite intellectual love. He may love Himself, since that is possible without false belief; and in any case intellectual love is a very special kind of love.

At this point Spinoza tells us that he has now given us 'all the remedies against the emotions'. The great remedy is clear and distinct ideas as to the nature of the emotions and their relation to external causes. There is a further advantage in love of God as compared to love of human beings: 'Spiritual unhealthiness and misfortunes can generally be traced to excessive love of something which is subject to many variations.' But clear and distinct knowledge 'begets a love towards a thing immutable and eternal', and such love has not the turbulent and disquieting character of love for an object which is transient and changeable.

Although personal survival after death is an illusion, there is nevertheless something in the human mind that is eternal. The mind can only imagine or remember while the body endures, but there is in God an idea which expresses the essence of this or that human body under the form of eternity, and this idea is the eternal part of the mind. The intellectual love of God, when experienced by an individual, is contained in this eternal part of the mind.

Blessedness, which consists of love towards God, is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself; we do not rejoice in it because we control our lusts, but we control our lusts because we rejoice in it.

The *Ethics* ends with these words:

'The wise man, in so far as he is regarded as such, is scarcely at all disturbed in spirit, but being conscious of himself, and of God, and of things, by a certain eternal necessity, never ceases to be, but always possesses true acquiescence of his spirit. If the way which I have pointed out as leading to this result seems exceedingly hard, it may nevertheless be discovered. Needs must it be hard, since it is so seldom found. How would it be possible, if salvation were ready to our hand, and could without great labour be found, that it should be by almost all men neglected? But all excellent things are as difficult as they are rare.'

In forming a critical estimate of Spinoza's importance as a philosopher, it is necessary to distinguish his ethics from his metaphysics, and to consider how much of the former can survive the rejection of the latter.

Spinoza's metaphysic is the best example of what may be called 'logical monism'—the doctrine, namely, that the world as a whole is a single substance, none of whose parts are logically capable of existing alone. The ultimate basis for this view is the belief that every proposition has a single subject and a single predicate, which leads us to the conclusion that relations and plurality must be illusory. Spinoza thought that the nature of the world and of human life could be logically deduced from self-evident axioms; we ought to be as resigned to events as to the fact that 2 and 2 are 4, since they are equally the outcome of logical necessity. The whole of this metaphysic is impossible to accept; it is incompatible with modern logic and with scientific method. Facts have to be discovered by observation, not by reasoning; when we successfully infer the future, we do so by means of principles which are not logically necessary, but are suggested by empirical data. And the concept of substance, upon which Spinoza relies, is one which neither science nor philosophy can nowadays accept.

But when we come to Spinoza's ethics, we feel—or at least I feel—that something, though not everything, can be accepted even when the metaphysical foundation has been rejected. Broadly speaking, Spinoza is concerned to show how it is possible to live nobly even when we recognize the limits of human power. He himself, by his doctrine of necessity, makes these limits narrower than they are; but when they indubitably exist, Spinoza's maxims are probably the best possible. Take, for instance, death: nothing that a man can do will make him immortal, and it is therefore futile to spend time in fears and lamentations over the fact that we must die. To be obsessed by the fear of death is a kind of slavery; Spinoza is right in saying that 'the free man thinks of nothing less than of death'. But even in this case, it is only death in



general that should be so treated; death of any particular disease should, if possible, be averted by submitting to medical care. What should, even in this case, be avoided, is a certain kind of anxiety or terror; the necessary measures should be taken calmly, and our thoughts should, as far as possible, be then directed to other matters. The same considerations apply to all other purely personal misfortunes.

But how about misfortunes to people whom you love? Let us think of some of the things that are likely to happen in our time to inhabitants of Europe or China. Suppose you are a Jew, and your family has been massacred. Suppose you are an underground worker against the Nazis, and your wife has been shot because you could not be caught. Suppose your husband, for some purely imaginary crime, has been sent to forced labour in the Arctic, and has died of cruelty and starvation. Suppose your daughter has been raped and then killed by enemy soldiers. Ought you, in these circumstances, to preserve a philosophic calm?

If you follow Christ's teaching, you will say 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' I have known Quakers who could have said this sincerely and profoundly, and whom I admired because they could. But before giving admiration one must be very sure that the misfortune is felt as deeply as it should be. One cannot accept the attitude of some among the Stoics, who said, 'What does it matter to me if my family suffer? I can still be virtuous.' The Christian principle, 'Love your enemies,' is good, but the Stoic principle, 'Be indifferent to your friends,' is bad. And the Christian principle does not inculcate calm, but an ardent love even towards the worst of men. There is nothing to be said against it except that it is too difficult for most of us to practise sincerely.

The primitive reaction to such disasters is revenge. When Macduff learns that his wife and children have been killed by Macbeth, he resolves to kill the tyrant himself. This reaction is still admired by most people, when the injury is great, and such as to arouse moral horror in disinterested people. Nor can it be wholly condemned, for it is one of the forces generating punishment, and punishment is sometimes necessary. Moreover, from the point of view of mental health, the impulse to revenge is likely to be so strong that, if it is allowed no outlet, a man's whole outlook on life may become distorted and more or less insane. This is not true universally, but it is true in a large percentage of cases. But on the other side it must be said that revenge is a very dangerous motive. In so far as society admits it, it allows a man to be the judge in his own case, which is exactly what the law tries to prevent. Moreover it is usually an excessive motive; it seeks to inflict more punishment than is desirable. Torture, for example, should not be punished by torture, but the man maddened by lust for vengeance will think a painless death too good for the object of his hate. Moreover—and it is here that Spinoza is in the right—a

life dominated by a single passion is a narrow life, incompatible with every kind of wisdom. Revenge as such is therefore not the best reaction to injury.

Spinoza would say what the Christian says, and also something more. For him, all sin is due to ignorance; he would 'forgive them, for they know not what they do'. But he would have you avoid the limited purview from which, in his opinion, sin springs, and would urge you, even under the greatest misfortunes, to avoid being shut up in the world of your sorrow; he would have you understand it by seeing it in relation to its causes and as a part of the whole order of nature. As we saw, he believes that hatred can be overcome by love: 'Hatred is increased by being reciprocated, and can on the other hand be destroyed by love. Hatred which is completely vanquished by love, passes into love; and love is thereupon greater, than if hatred had not preceded it.' I wish I could believe this, but I cannot, except in exceptional cases where the person hating is completely in the power of the person who refuses to hate in return. In such cases, surprise at being not punished may have a reforming effect. But so long as the wicked have power, it is not much use assuring them that you do not hate them, since they will attribute your words to the wrong motive. And you cannot deprive them of power by non-resistance.

The problem for Spinoza is easier than it is for one who has no belief in the ultimate goodness of the universe. Spinoza thinks that, if you see your misfortunes as they are in reality, as part of the concatenation of causes stretching from the beginning of time to the end, you will see that they are only misfortunes to you, not to the universe, to which they are merely passing discords heightening an ultimate harmony. I cannot accept this; I think that particular events are what they are, and do not become different by absorption into a whole. Each act of cruelty is eternally a part of the universe; nothing that happens later can make that act good rather than bad, or can confer perfection on the whole of which it is a part.

Nevertheless, when it is your lot to have to endure something that is (or seems to you) worse than the ordinary lot of mankind, Spinoza's principle of thinking about the whole, or at any rate about larger matters than your own grief, is a useful one. There are even times when it is comforting to reflect that human life, with all that it contains of evil and suffering, is an infinitesimal part of the life of the universe. Such reflections may not suffice to constitute a religion, but in a painful world they are a help towards sanity and an antidote to the paralysis of utter despair.